

# DISCERNMENT

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## Haven: Asceticism, Spiritual Formation, and Youth Ministry

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

**Haven:**

## **Asceticism, Spiritual Formation, and Youth Ministry**

*Brandon Pierce*

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**Abstract:** *This essay reflects upon the application of a field of scholarly study—ascetic theology—to a ministerial context: youth ministry. The goal here is to offer an example of and reflections upon the application of a personal scholarly interest to ministerial contexts.*

*The essay begins with an assessment of the ministry context, illustrating the problems that demanded attention and solution. It then outlines the sociological and theological theories of asceticism that informed the proposed solution. Having discussed the foundational context and ideas, the next section describes in detail the proposed solution named Haven and elaborates on the ascetic theory behind it. The essay concludes with practical and theological reflection on Haven as an application of theoretical research to ministerial practice.*

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Although scholarship has its own intrinsic value for ministry, this does not circumvent the necessary secondary-level reflection on how one's knowledge and particular interests can shape one's ministerial practice and organization.<sup>1</sup> This essay is an example of and reflection on the application of scholarly interests in ministry.<sup>2</sup> As I began my first full-time ministry as

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Nathan G. Jennings, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010). Jennings' study develops the sense in which theology is a formative discipline inseparable from other spiritual disciplines or ministerial programs.

<sup>2</sup> This essay reflects upon a past event that reflects ministerial application of scholarly interests. As such, this essay lacks the typical sets of data and controls that a more substantive study would require. Therefore, this study is intentionally framed as (1) an example, and (2) a reflection. Without prolonged, methodological application it is impossible to measure with any accuracy the success or failure of this program outside of the practical and theological terms established in the article.

a youth minister, I was writing a thesis on the subject of ascetic theology for my master's degree. It was difficult not to think about applying the ascetic theology that dominated my intellectual curiosity to the practical challenges I faced. What follows is a narration of the ministerial contexts, an overview of the essential and relevant points of ascetic theology, a description of my application of these principles in a program called Haven, and a reflection on the dynamics of that application.

### Contexts

In August 2010 I accepted a full-time position as a youth & family minister. I had just finished all the course work for my master's degree in theology, but still needed to complete my thesis, which I supposed I could do from my new location just as well as from the school I attended. As it turns out, writing a thesis can be difficult when one works in full-time ministry and has a wife and newborn child. The thesis project took another year and a half to complete, which became something of a blessing as the research I was doing and my preoccupation with this project became a lens through which I analyzed the ministry in which I worked.

The church I worked at consisted of roughly 250 members when I arrived in 2010. The youth totaled to 18 on the official list, with 7-9 average attendance on Sundays and Wednesday gatherings. When I began working there the best advice I received was to wait at least a year before making any substantive changes, so I could learn the social situation better and to develop relationships and trust. So I began working with the system as it was when I arrived, which reflected a typical youth ministry structure—one with which I had myself grown up. The structure consisted of regular Sunday and Wednesday classes with some kind of fun program or outing each month. We would have retreats in the fall or spring and the summers would be packed full of weekly activities, Bible studies, mission trips, and camps. This is a model that exists in many churches with slight variations and continues to be successful in terms of providing a structure for teens to form a community of faith as the basis for religious education and formation. Although some rightly criticize certain negative or deficient aspects of this model, I had no interest in reinventing the wheel.<sup>3</sup> Rather

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also the host of substantive alternatives to program-driven youth ministry, in particular Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry:*

what I discovered was that this model was not feasible at this church; it simply did not work here.

Several practical aspects of our church made this model implausible. First, our church was geographically downtown, but demographically suburban. Given the city's notorious traffic congestion, this meant that the standard commute to the church could be anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes. It became a real ordeal just to get to the church as a central meeting point for activities. Parents and teens would have to count the cost, and many times this meant minimal attendance.

Second, we were a small church in a big building located in a bigger city. The size of the church had dwindled from its zenith in the 800s or 900s to a church in the vicinity of 250 members, most of whom were aged over 50. Many of our members, however, still had memories of times when the church was much bigger. Our older teens remembered graduating into middle school and being part of a youth group of 40 or 50 teens. There was, then, a kind of ecclesial confusion where our memory and ethos was that of a community that no longer existed. The kinds of activities we held—activities that worked for the larger group that used to exist—fell flat with our small group. Some literature has been published about youth ministry in small churches,<sup>4</sup> but it was difficult to make any appropriate shifts because we did not think of ourselves as a small church—just a large church that was undergoing temporary setbacks.

Finally, when I arrived the only teens that lived anywhere near each other and had anything else in common besides where they attended church were sibling groups, and even some of them attended separate schools. Granted, youth group members had at least gone to the same church for years, but for the most part they did not share life together. Not only did this have an ill effect on the community-forming aspect of youth ministry, it made monthly programming impractical from an administrative standpoint. Everyone had different schedules. We would often have to reschedule events just to accommodate enough to make activities functional.

All of these issues made programming a headache and resulted in activities that were discouraging rather than edifying. The activities lacked any deeper value other than keeping a ministry on life-support. Their

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*Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); and Mike Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Rick Chromey, *Youth Ministry in Small Churches* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009).

implicit purpose was to keep the idea of an ecclesial community alive, and perhaps provide the teens with the minimum of constructive and morally positive outlets. It is questionable whether they were even successful at these meager goals. This way of organizing our communal life together did not work.

Throughout this time I had been writing a thesis on ascetic theology, and I kept going back to the core sociological and theological features of asceticism as pastoral ideals in my present context. Not only was my own theological, and therefore pastoral, worldview shaped and formed by ascetic theology, I began to see it as something that had potential for addressing some of the practical problems I faced in ministry.

### Ascetic Theology

The scholarly study of asceticism has been transformed by sociological inquiry over the past three centuries.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally asceticism denotes a set of extreme forms of self-denial and self-discipline practiced mainly by monks and nuns in monastic communities apart from mainstream society with little normative application for those who do not choose such a life. Sociological studies since Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* have tended to use this term in a more generic sense. For example, Geoffrey Harpham defines asceticism as "any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification."<sup>6</sup> In this definition we can see the essential similarities between a monk in the monastery and an athlete on the practice field. Both deny themselves in one respect or another for the purposes of some perceived "empowerment or gratification." Narrowing down this broad definition, Richard Valantasis emphasizes the cultural dimensions of asceticism, arguing that asceticism consists of "performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity."<sup>7</sup> Here we get to the heart of asceticism as a particular way of thinking about spiritual (trans)formation by framing individual development within the broader socio-cultural structures that give

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<sup>5</sup> For a helpful overview see Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, "Introduction" in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xix-xxv. See also Oscar Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey G. Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 8.

meaning to individual identity. Ascetic transformation resists dominant identities and cultures by developing a new, alternative identity and culture. The practices that resist the dominant context work to inaugurate the new context.

Several dimensions of this way of thinking about asceticism need to be unpacked to gain a better grasp of the way asceticism frames individual and cultural transformation. First, asceticism presupposes that identity is a complex yet fluid concept. Valantasis prefers the term, “subjectivity” to refer to identity in terms of the whole person, the subject who experiences and relates to the world within and outside itself. Transformation results when a person, through habitual conditioning, finds new ways of relating to his or her self, others, and the world around them.

Second, asceticism views transformation as a simultaneous practice of resistance and invention. Elaborating upon his simple definition, Valantasis later defines asceticism as transformation relative to an existing “externally projected or subjectively experienced dominant social or religious context.”<sup>8</sup> By doing so, Valantasis is able to broaden what we tend to think of as ascetic while still explaining the nature of practices traditionally associated with the term. Asceticism describes any activity that develops an alternative identity to the dominant norms of any given culture. The association of asceticism with self-denial is true to the extent that ascetic activity denies one kind of self in order to make it possible to inaugurate a new kind of self. Ascetic activities might appear extreme or at least bizarre to the dominant identity precisely because these actions are not meant to make sense in the dominant social context, but rather work toward an alternative identity and social context. Thus, on the one hand, a teenager going through a “goth” phase by wearing black clothing is a prototypical ascetic act although it seems to lack any of the bodily rigor we tend to associate with asceticism. Such a teenager seeks to develop an alternative “goth” identity over against other, more dominant identities through practices including, but not limited to, clothing choices.

On the other hand, any single act by itself is not necessarily ascetic. Severely limiting one’s diet is not ascetic unless it is done as part of a larger program in resistance to a dominant identity and toward the development of alternative identity. Fashion models, for instance, will do many things, fasting among them, in order not just to achieve a certain look, but to become the kinds of people that they desire to be. As such, their fasting can be considered ascetic insofar as it seeks to develop an alternative identity

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 101-02.

beyond the social norm. What distinguishes asceticism from any given action is the alternative identity that asceticism seeks to develop; an identity that gives meaning to otherwise strange practices.<sup>9</sup>

Third, asceticism sees the self as a social concept, inextricably tied to the social world in which it lives and the cultural systems that give coherence and cohesion to this social world. Valantasis summons the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action," and further that culture is "an ordered system of meaning and symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place."<sup>10</sup> In this sense culture represents the broader set of values, modes of communication, histories, and beliefs that undergird and give meaning to any given experience or action. Culture thus defined, however, is abstract. We experience culture embodied in symbols whether philosophical, moral, aesthetic, or by any other means. Therefore, Valantasis refers to culture as the "symbolic universe" that provides the content of these otherwise abstract meaning-making structures.

The fourth important feature of asceticism is the link between asceticism and the surrounding social and symbolic world. The historical association of asceticism with withdrawal is not accidental. A new identity requires new habits, but these new habits require a broader culture that can provide the social and meaning-making structures that allow individual habits to form an identity. Because culture is the structure that gives meaning to individual and corporate identity, transformation requires more than just a set of different behaviors, it requires a new culture, a symbolic universe, which can give deep meaning to these alternative behaviors and integrate them into a holistic self.

For instance, in terms of contemporary American culture religious fasts make little sense. Christianity, communicated through local ecclesial contexts, is the cultural system that provides the meaning-making structures that make fasting a coherent practice. At the same time, there are some forms of fasting that are made meaningful by contemporary American culture, such as dieting to achieve a certain ideal body and all the

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<sup>9</sup> Valantasis formulates this distinction by contrasting asceticism with formation in *Making of the Self*, 80-100 (chapter 4). As Valantasis formulates it I am not entirely convinced that this is the right terminology, as asceticism from one perspective is an act of formation. The point, however, is that formation works toward the dominant identity of a culture, while asceticism seeks to establish a new identity and culture over-against the dominant context.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 10.

deeper cultural structures that explain why a person would find this kind of body desirable and valuable. Thus ascetic practices require a new symbolic universe in order to develop a new subjectivity. In practice this means that any genuine attempt at transformation requires one to make a break with the dominant culture, which often involves a geographical break as well.

These definitions make it possible to see the fundamental connections between what monks do in monasteries and what the rest of us do in our otherwise ordinary practices. When St. Anthony left his life in the city for the deserts of Egypt, he did so as a rejection of or in resistance to the norms of his former world and the kinds of identities these norms cultivated, and to inaugurate an authentic Christian identity. Although formal monasticism remains somewhat obscure, St. Anthony's pattern can be seen repeated all across modern culture. We see it in everything from fashion models and bodybuilders to private schools and street gangs. In each of these instances we can identify the intention to create a new identity, a new subjectivity, in resistance to existing norms, and the accompanying development of alternative cultures that help create and sustain these alternative identities. Between monks and street gangs we find a lot of common ground: a set of alternative practices and redefined cultures work together to create and cultivate an alternative subjectivity over-against previously established norms.

To summarize, asceticism is a holistic perspective on human transformation addressing both the internal and external dynamics of human experience. Asceticism frames individual transformation within the various cultural systems that a person experiences, and views transformation as a process of resisting dominant cultures and their associated identities and development of alternative cultures and identities.

At the center of ascetical activity is a self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture. As this new self emerges (in relationship to itself, to others, to society, to the world), it masters the behaviors that enable it at once to deconstruct the old self and to construct the new.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 7.



Christian asceticism is a matter of developing the “mind” of Christ by engaging in Christian practices in an environment that gives them meaning and integrates them into a holistic identity.<sup>12</sup> The concept of asceticism understood in this way provides a natural framework for thinking about ministries of all kinds. What kinds of people are we trying to become? What ways of being need to be resisted? How do(es) our social world(s) cultivate or hinder the development of our identity in Christ? In many ways the work of practical pastoral discernment is already concerned with determining how to answer those questions. The concept of asceticism provides a helpful framework for asking and answering these questions and addressing them with practical solutions.

### **Haven: Ascetic Theology in Modern Youth Ministry**

The aim of my thesis was to apply the sociological and theological understanding of asceticism outlined above to a particular work of Christian ascetic theology, Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent*,<sup>13</sup> in order to discern how his understanding of the Christian life can make normative connections with a modern, non-monastic world. The effort to create a facsimile approach is doomed to fail insofar as the monastic vocation (or subjectivity) and the social and symbolic worlds that sustain it are not shared by modern-day teenagers. As such, the unique practices and way of life of formal monasteries would only be perverted by attempts to emulate their fasting, poverty, and sexual renunciation. Teen rooms are not monasteries.

Nevertheless, there are points of contact; horizons at which our modern world met the monastic life of 7<sup>th</sup> century Palestine: namely, in the universal Christian vocation of non-conformity to the pattern of this world and transformation into the likeness of Christ (Romans 12:2). Climacus writes compellingly, “I long for the immortal beauty that you gave me before this clay,” indicating the longing that even, perhaps especially,

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:5-11 stands out as a central ascetic imperative of resisting the normal dominant ways of being and inaugurating a new self defined by Christ by engaging in practices exhibited by Christ that run counter to the dominant norms of the world. For further reflection on the ascetic basis of Philippians see Robin Scroggs, “Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians,” in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, eds. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187-208.

<sup>13</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery Press, 1978). References to this work will be to the chapter and verse notation of this edition (e.g., chapter 1 verse 1 as 1.1).

teenagers have for transformation over-against the “clay” that dominates our lives.<sup>14</sup>

As I wrestled with how to make sense of this horizon it became clear that whatever value our present ministerial practices had, they were insufficient and ultimately ineffective in our context either in resisting the many identities alive in the world of our teenagers, or in cultivating an alternative identity—the image and likeness of God—or even resisting competing identities. A lot of this failure had to do with the incoherent confusion created when the kinds of norms and practices we engaged in are couched in the disparate and variegated world our teens lived in, with all their competing identities and concomitant social and symbolic worlds. Simply put, we were trying to do uniquely Christian things in a social world that obscured their meaning, purpose, and reason, and therefore their power. We needed to find a space free from the cacophony of competing subjectivities—if only a temporarily—so that the image and likeness of God could become a clear goal and product of our activity.

In this respect I began imagining with some of the teens, parents, and other ministry leaders how we could rethink our ministry structure to work with ascetic principles towards our major goal of spiritual formation. The product of this imagination was Haven. One Sunday each month the teens and some parents leave after church services to eat lunch together. We then travel to a distant location—usually property owned by church members or actual retreat sites—and spend the day together playing, resting, exploring, and enjoying community with one another. As evening approached we would eat dinner together on location, and move into a time of worship and devotion, wrapping up the night by cleaning up and heading back to the church. The table below represents a typical schedule:

Activity	Time
Worship with the Church congregation	10:00 am-12:00 pm
Lunch with youth group, parents, and volunteers	12:00-1:00 pm
Travel to destination	1:00-2:00 pm
Time for play and rest	2:00-5:00 pm
Dinner	5:00-6:00 pm
Evening worship and devotional	6:00-7:00 pm
Clean-up and depart	7:00-7:30 pm
Travel back to church for pick-up	7:30-8:30 pm

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<sup>14</sup> Climacus, *The Ladder*, 29.11.

On the outside Haven simply takes the idea of retreats and reworks them into a model for monthly programming. On the inside, however, the principles of asceticism undergird Haven and turn it into an effective means of establishing the basis for Christian spiritual formation. The point here is that Haven is a way of framing the structural components of a ministry to youth and families that is informed by an ascetic view of spiritual formation. Haven involved a set of practices designed to resist the dominant culture and identities and to work toward a distinctly Christian identity.

On the one hand, some practices were prohibited, or at least regulated. Things like smart phones, iPads, and other electronic devices that connected teens to everyday life were not allowed for free or private use. Instead they could be enjoyed in community for a limited amount of time. In addition to individual items, attitudes, and actions inconsistent with a Christian identity were prohibited: things like cursing, bullying, fighting, and anything else that failed to love both God and neighbor. Not that these rules fixed all negative behavior, but the new world Haven symbolized made it possible for these kinds of rules to make better sense and make the otherwise dreamy, idealistic goal of Christian life seem possible. These norms began to lose their puritanical and “uncool” reputation because we inhabited an alternative social and symbolic universe where their true value could register.

On the other hand, many other practices were incorporated and gained deeper significance. Worship in prayer, singing, and Bible study framed the day, beginning with worship with the church and ending with a time of worship at the end of the day. Meals formed another framing layer, following the worship service with the church and preceding the worship service in the evenings.<sup>15</sup> The free schedule of the afternoon provided the teens with opportunity to enjoy themselves; to play.<sup>16</sup> This play involved everything from sports and swimming to exploration, and board games. Nothing was mandated, but several distinctly spiritual

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<sup>15</sup> On the idea of meals as a Christian practice see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 199-204; Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009); and Ken Albala and Trudy Eden, eds., *Food and Faith in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> On the nature of play in sociological and theological perspective see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); and Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

practices tended to happen regularly, including teens engaging in solitude and silence, and opportunities for pastoral counseling.

In one sense these practices—meals, sports, board games—are normal. But by repeatedly withdrawing into a separate space, culturally as well as geographically distinct, it was possible to integrate these otherwise normal practices with other abnormal, alternative practices—worship, Christian norms, exclusion of certain activities (e.g., drugs, pornography, bullying, etc.) and regulation or resistance to others (television, music, video games, etc.) under the aegis of a Christian identity and culture as an alternative to the prevailing identities and cultures of their lives back home.

### **Reflections on Pastoral Application**

What Haven did was solve a set of practical and theological crises. Practically, it made scheduling simple and resolved transportation difficulties. Moreover, it fit our numerically small group better, as many of the places we visited would not have been possible with larger numbers. Finally, it created a centralized social world for our teens to share in common. Most of our teens lacked any common social world other than Sunday church meetings and programs that were sparsely attended. Haven provided an opportunity to develop more extensive and meaningful social commonality.

Theologically, Haven gave our social gatherings deeper meaning than communal life-support or as a means of occupying teens so they do not get into trouble. Haven provided an opportunity for alternative practices that worked to shape Christian identity. Even normal forms of recreation and play at Haven took on deeper significance and became a means of constructing an alternative Christian self. As such, Haven itself became a kind of ascetic practice on the whole: something teens and parents did on a regular basis that resisted the many norms of society and inaugurated a new self-understanding, community, and culture.

The idea of Haven also raises some important practical and theological considerations. Practically, two issues merit attention: whether Haven can be reproduced with larger groups, and the importance of longevity and repetition. As mentioned above, the logistics of Haven worked well with our small group of 5-10 teens, parents, and volunteers. The intimacy and freedom that was possible in the smaller locations we used—mostly lake houses and small retreat sites—would not be possible in groups much more than twice our number. It is hard to say how and by

what means larger groups can work around the logistical issues, though it seems plausible.<sup>17</sup>

The other practical issue concerning Haven is the matter of longevity and repetition. At the heart of monastic life is the insistence on making a schedule and keeping it over and over again. In order for Haven to be effective at its goal of ascetic transformation it would require teens and parents to attend faithfully for an extended period of time. It would also require that Haven be organized appropriately. When I tried to spend the day in the youth room instead of our normal retreat locations, the activity disintegrated. The same was true for a number of other locations that were not suitable for the event. Any inconsistencies and disruptions in the pattern hinder the deeper transformative possibilities, and at worse cause more confusion than clarity on Christian life. Any legitimate measure of success for Haven would require a long-term commitment and study. It was possible within the time I implemented it, a little over two years, to see signs of deeper transformation and group solidarity, but the deeper potential of Haven for Christian transformation would ostensibly require a much longer time-frame with consistent attendance and accurate organization.

Theologically, Haven raises two challenges. First, like traditional ascetic movements Haven seems to operate on a world-denying ethos. The simple response is that Haven is a response to the disorienting cacophony of competing dominant cultures by creating an alternative culture in which Christian identity can be formed. This requires that, to some extent, the “world” must be denied and resisted. Yet we need not think of Christian ascetic practices like Haven as an attempt to create a “Christian” culture entirely distinct from the goods of the secular world. Every typical form of entertainment was available during the free hours at Haven, though certain restrictions were placed on many of them. The aim of asceticism is not to reject the exterior features of the dominant subjectivity and culture, but to reject the underlying roots of this dominant subjectivity and culture. Some actions and habits do not translate well into the new identity, such as drug use or extramarital sex. But the aim of Christian ascetical practices like Haven is to embrace every plausible good in terms of the new, Christian symbolic universe. In that respect Haven does not represent a world-denying ethos so much as a world-transforming ethos.

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<sup>17</sup> As I have no experience with larger groups any suggestion here would be purely speculative.

Second, it may seem that Haven reinforces the separation of teens from the broader congregation and thus neglect the vital place of intergenerational relationships, perhaps replacing the church altogether. On this point it is important to consider the place of Haven among the broader transformative strategies of the Church. Haven is one among many strategies of the whole church for Christian spiritual (trans)formation. Teens still participated in the regular worship services and other aspects of the life of the church. Moreover, Haven itself is designed to be an extension of the church through its intergenerational communal make-up. Parents, ministers, and volunteers join teens in this practice. This intergenerational presence contrasts with typical youth events in which parents infrequently participate. Haven provides a space in which parents can engage teenagers in meals, play, and worship. At the same time the venues where Haven works best are places that allow for ample distance between parents and teens when necessary. Parents often took the opportunity to rest and bond with the other parents and adults during the free time.

## Conclusion

The study of asceticism provides an in-depth and helpful framework for understanding the complex dynamics of the formation of personal identity, which is a central goal of ministry. The idea of Haven was a creative application of ascetic principles that developed out of my own scholarly interests and education.<sup>18</sup> Not everyone will focus on a subject so easily molded into practical, ministerial application, yet it seems necessary, if not inevitable, that ministers tap into whatever vital force their scholarly interests hold for them and allow those studies to enrich their ministries either directly through straightforward practical application or indirectly in numerous means private and public.

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed look at the application of ascetic theory to ecclesial spiritual formation in the life of the church see Richard Valantasis, *Dazzling Bodies: Rethinking Spirituality and Community Formation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

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*Brandon's research interests include: primitivism in the history of Christianity, asceticism and monasticism, the work of Søren Kierkegaard, and the intersections of academia and ministry.*